Early Auden

Abstract

W. H. Auden's early work is marked by a preoccupation with the hero figure, both in terms of the literary greats with whom Auden establishes poetic conversations, and in terms of the inter-war Truly Strong Man, whom the poet both explores for his power, and exposes as a figure half-dreamt by a nation in search of itself. Tracing Auden's heroes in his 'early' work (that is, poetry, essays and plays completed between 1922, when he commenced writing verse, and 1939, when he left England for the United States), this essay delves into questions of literary tradition and inheritance, visionary landscapes, and posthumous reputations. Critics have often cited 1939 as a 'watershed', marking Auden's poetic maturity as well as his departure from these shores. Yet few have understood the pre-1939 work by considering the juvenilia, and seeking its links to the more accomplished work of the thirties. Examining Auden's work alone, and that completed in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood, this essay uses the hero figure as way of uncovering Auden's attitudes to the business of writing in his formative years.

Key Words

W. H. Auden; Christopher Isherwood; hero; juvenilia; 1930s; watershed; tradition; vision; posthumous reputation; earliness

Essay

In tackling 'Early Auden' this essay of course borrows the title and topic of a major publication by Edward Mendelson, and attention must be paid to the latter's scrupulous curatorship of Auden's work and posthumous reputation (Mendelson, 1981). Mendelson's

scope is 1927 (in the summer of which Auden 'wrote the first poems he wanted to preserve' (Mendelson, 1981: vii)) to 1938. Following his lead, but expanding his purview, this article defines Auden's 'early' output as including the juvenilia (1922-8), the work of the later twenties, and the plays and poems of the thirties, although the accomplished nature of the latter phase of work (in the case of individual poems, if not always of collections or dramas in their entirety) puts up for debate the proper definition of 'earliness' in the work of any poet.[i] We make use here of Auden's departure for the United States in 1939, not to separate the European from the Atlantic Auden, nor to mark the start of a decline, but instead to suggest that his leaving England signaled the end of 'earliness', the vitiation of a set of self-reflexive preoccupations, through which the poet may be seen to be alert to his own stage of poetic development: apprenticeship, boyhood, the poetic canon (in artistic and saintly terms), posthumous fate and, binding them all, heroism.[ii] Such preoccupations are not jettisoned entirely in the work of America-and-after – the move to the States is a watershed and not a rubicon – but, rather, they mark the early phase in a pronounced way. Focusing on the twenties and thirties as the 'early Auden', and investigating the poet's own interest in earliness, this article moves away from the divided camps of 1970s appreciations or refutations of genius (broadly, Porter versus Leavis), and sidesteps later heavily theorized analyses of the functions of the early lyric (Emig, 2003; Quipp, 2007), in order to view the ways that Auden from his first experiments simultaneously constructs and derides the notion of the hero (poetic or otherwise), at a time of life, and of artistic development, when heroes might be deemed essential. It is suggested here that in patterning his earliness with an abiding interest in the hero figure, albeit from a pose often skeptical, Auden establishes his own place in the poetic pantheon. Further, these heroic labors can be traced not only in the more well-known plays of the thirties, but also in the oft-ignored juvenilia, and in the manuscript of

‘Writing’ (1932), in which the poet addresses a young audience on the foundations of his literary practice.

<h1> Apprenticeship

In 1946-7, at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village, Auden ventured a series of lectures on Shakespeare, precursors to those found in *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962). In a poetically productive time, it can be presumed that Auden’s willingness to accept the responsibility to speak was driven by a pecuniary motive, although, as Peter Porter has noted, ‘he almost always writes well about Shakespeare and about music’ (Porter, 1978: 107), and here he found the latter in the former. Whatever the impetus, the lectures were well received by a packed hall, and ‘somebody remarked that the crowd couldn’t have been more enthusiastic if Shakespeare had been lecturing on Auden’ (Kermode, 2001: 10). The wit of that statement is based upon a widely accepted notion that, however well established by the forties, Auden can in no way rival the bard. In Auden’s own life, Shakespeare proves a touchstone not only for the consideration of technical mastery and the presentation of moral questions in dramatic form, but also for just such assessments of poetic standing, and the playwright’s influence can be traced across his poetry and prose. Perhaps the most memorable of Shakespeare’s appearances comes in the second act of Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), where ‘Destructive Desmond’ the experimental cabaret performer is remembered as having set the bard alight: ‘Haven’t you seen him before? Oh, he’s marvellous! I saw him last winter in New York. He burnt an entire first folio Shakespeare, page by page. I’ve never laughed so much in all my life’ (Auden/Isherwood, 1935: 128-9). Again, there is a transgression of the rules of the canon, although here the stated joke is intended to appall. In *Letter to Lord Byron* (1936), Auden

adapts to rhyme royal the ottava rima of the eponymous poet's *Don Juan*, and displays further sensitivity to the ranking of literary figures when he describes (or decries) his own writing as a 'cotton frock' in comparison to the 'gorgeous fur coat' of Shakespeare, adding a name-check for the similarly impressively be-decked Spenser, Dryden and Wordsworth (Auden, 1976: 89). He goes on to note that 'Milton may thank his stars that he is dead, / Although he's learnt by heart in public schools' (Auden, 1976: 89), ensuring his reputation. It may be that Milton is most useful in considering the operation of Shakespeare as a poetic hero in Auden's early work, since his first published poem, 'On Shakespeare' (1630), appeared as an (unattributed) frontispiece to the second folio in 1632. We might consider this public appearance to mark Milton's transition from a versifier to a public poet, and his theme is the posthumous reputation that accrues to the truly great, asking 'What needs my Shakespeare for his honored Bones / The labor of an age in piled stones'? Rather than an ostentatious tomb, the playwright will be honored by the living monument of his readers: 'Thou in our wonder and astonishment / Hast built thyself a livelong monument'. In a partial literalization of this effort, Milton asserts that the readers of Shakespeare will be made 'Marble', forming an enviable sepulcher: 'That kings for such a tomb would wish to die' (Milton, 2000: 1782). Rejecting the pyramids or stone sepulchers of more traditional mourning practice, the poem suggests that it is through dazzled readership and fond memory that an enduring monument will be found, a conception of monumentality that, while appearing to turn readers to marble, keeps past work alive in their beating hearts (a 'livelong' monument). In making such claims Milton is, of course, also making his first attempt at securing such a posthumous reputation for himself, albeit anonymously at this stage. Amongst the poets, of whose rankings and reputations he is so conscious, Auden echoed Milton in staking his claim upon literary fame through a process of assessing the work of others, resulting in poetry which either explicitly stated their names and abilities, or absorbed,

modified and incorporated their forms and phrasing into his own.[iii] Shakespeare's Sonnet 121 ('No, I am that I am, and they that level / At my abuses reckon up their own') provides further assistance in tracing the split work of the apprentice poet, in which he must come to know himself, and secure a public reputation, two achievements that rest upon the poetic voice. Paul Regan has suggested that 'the sonnet encapsulates a concern with self-realization and self-representation that was to preoccupy Auden profoundly in both his critical and his creative writings' (Regan, 2013: 266). Therefore somewhere between Shakespeare's sonnet, and the poem which formed his second folio frontispiece, sits the doubled task of Auden's early poetic journey. While he claims that it was in March 1922 that he 'decided to become a poet' (Auden, 2002: 42), it was not until 1927 that Auden can be said to have found that voice (with the publication of 'Who stands, the crux left of the watershed', further discussed below) and made, by his own admission, 'his transition from childhood to adulthood' (Mendelson, 1981: 27). For Auden, self-discovery and the establishment of a poetic voice that will endure is achieved through the identification, assessment and incorporation of a series of poetic heroes. One function of the poetry so established is the interrogation of the notion of heroism itself.

<h1> Writing

An echo of Sonnet 121 appears in the manuscript 'Writing', Auden's initial stab at what was to become the piece 'Writing, or the Pattern Between People', completed for Naomi Mitchison's *An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents*, an attempt to explore the fundamentals of civilization and the latest thinking in the arts and sciences, published in 1932.[iv] Writing to commission, Auden struggles with the task as he excavates the existential questions that underpin literary work, and the sonnet creeps in, alongside a touch of Freud:

‘At sometime or other in human history, when and how is not known exactly, man became self-conscious, he began to feel, I am I, and You are not-I; we are shut inside ourselves and apart from each other. There is no whole but the self’ (Auden, 1990: 40). This, he argues, is the source of the drive toward poetry. Refracted through Auden’s redeployment here, Sonnet 121 can be seen to tackle, amongst other things, self-reflection; it is a poem about the psychological effort that is essential to the creation of art. Self-reflection as a poetic engine had already turned up in Auden’s ‘Narcissus’ (1927), further discussed below. Here, one’s essential isolation from one’s fellow man forms a gloomy beginning to a piece aimed at a young audience, and Katherine Bucknell has noted that the manuscript ‘was altered for publication perhaps more than any other essay [Auden] ever wrote’ (Bucknell, 1990: 17), presumably as much for its dour tone as for its grappling with the fundamentals. Mitchison, for her part, had ‘rather a fight to get this scarcely well-known young writer accepted as the author of the piece about writing’, since ‘the other authors in this section [on ‘Values’ or arts] were, so to speak, grown-ups, men and women already with a considerable reputation’ (Mitchison, 1990: 35). While his inexperience might be seen to stand against him, Auden was, by virtue of his youth and his current role as a teacher in Helensburgh, well-equipped to understand the pedagogic needs of young people. Having comparatively lately completed the doubled poetic task noted above – having, that is, found his voice – Auden sets out to explain the nature and the business of writing to those who might follow him.

In its manuscript form, the essay is sprawling, covering manifold topics, although Bucknell suggests that it finds a central concern in ‘the relation between the writer and the society in which he lives’, and anticipates Auden’s later work in marking ‘the birth in Auden of a self-conscious desire to communicate with his audience’ (Bucknell, 1990: 17). This interest in the artist/society relationship may also be traced in Auden’s civil (anticipating an audience) and

vatic (lacking external purpose) modes of poetry, the 'Ariel' and 'Prospero' models set out during his discussion of Robert Frost in *The Dyer's Hand* (Auden, 2013). In 'Writing', Auden reaches for metaphors which might resonate with his young audience, and suggests that the written book is the child of a marriage between the author and society and, further, that the marriage between a writer and his language leads to the birth of a book. While Auden's interest here is in communication with his readership, his chosen concepts also anticipate his 'shift away from the human beings that make up society to a more abstract spouse, words themselves' (Bucknell, 1990: 18). It seems reasonable to suppose that Auden also has in mind here the 'abstract spouse' of the Church, bride to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). Man's relationship with Christ through faith builds a church; his relationship with language begets poetry. At this relatively early stage in his own poetic development, then, Auden's attempts to explain writing's function and processes shear off into other discourses, and into other forms of intellectual hot water. On the other hand, he returns to preoccupations traceable in his juvenilia – those of posthumous reputation and immortality. Lamenting the loss of 'group life' (a concept he borrows from Gerald Heard) in his contemporary, atomized society, Auden states that man is 'increasingly aware of the shortness and uncertainty of the life of the individual. He looks round desperately for some means of prolonging it […]. The writer is like the schoolboy who carves his initials on a desk; he wishes to live forever' (Auden, 1932: 43).[v] The simile is made more complicated by those initials often being accompanied by a date, in that the schoolboy is seeking to mark a moment, i.e. to be young and/or present in the school forever, rather than marking a straightforward bid for immortality (because to be *young* is very heaven). Auden's selection of this conceit is telling, since his poetry and plays frequently put forward the public school as a form of enduring group life, and the school remains a source of poetic inspiration long after Auden's own education has ended. His speculations under the heading 'Why People Write Books' return to

this split between the moment and immortality: ‘People write in order to be read. They would like to be read by everybody and for ever. They feel alone, cut off from each other in an indifferent world where they do not live for very long. How can they get in touch again; how can they prolong their lives’ (Auden, 1990: 48). However, despite being the ‘child’ of this yearning for the prolonged life, the poem’s relationship with the reader takes place within a restricted timeframe: ‘We are treating any piece of writing as a work of art when we regard our reading of it as a single act, confined to the reading and understanding of the writing itself, and not as one of a series of acts extending before or after our reading’ (Auden, 1990: 48). This is only an apparent paradox, however. It is precisely the poem’s appeal to the reader in the act of reading, its singularity (see Quipp, 2007) that ensures its endurance. Just like Milton, Auden’s concern in the early stages of his engagement with a public readership is to tackle poetry’s long tail, and to analyze the basis of the poet’s subsequent immortal status. While these are concerns which have belonged to poetry for centuries (as the Miltonian intertext indicates), they are also ‘live’ issues for Auden, and he concludes the manuscript of ‘Writing’ with the statement: ‘Its not only literature but our lives that are going to pot. We cant sit on the fence much longer. Well’ (Auden, 1990: 54). In the published version, the final word is a question (‘Well?’), which may be read as a provocation to the poet’s audience. For all Mitchison’s concerns regarding Auden’s inexperience, his status as a not-quite-grown-up, this final appeal is a form of baton-passing, where the poet, having outlined (in terms sometimes faltering) the task of writing, falls silent, asking others to speak.

<h1> Discovering a Voice

‘Writing’ in its published incarnation included a list of ‘Books to Read’, to allow its audience further illumination on the topics discussed, and Auden places amongst his selection Walter

de la Mare's *Come Hither!* (1923). First published the year after Auden's declaration of intent to become a poet, the volume informed his early practice, after he was given a copy while at Gresham's school (Bucknell, 2003: xxi). Selecting it for his young audience, Auden is not imposing his current tastes, so much as passing on one of the books that lit the touch-paper of his youthful imagination. By the time of 'Writing', Auden's influences were many and varied, and a succession of critics has unpicked the list of authors that have influenced his work. Bucknell notes that the Gresham's school library held a copy of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* (1915-22), providing an insight into the verse of recent years, including that of W. H. Davies (Bucknell, 2003: xxi), and Auden had already become fascinated with the work of William Wordsworth, John Keats, and 'even AE [Housman]' (Auden, qtd. Mendelson, 1981: 27). Mendelson has traced the move from Thomas Hardy in the summer of 1923 ('for more than a year I read no one else' (Auden, qtd. Mendelson, 1981: 27)), to Edward Thomas in the Autumn of the following year, joined by Housman, Robert Frost, and Emily Dickinson, until T. S. Eliot conquered all in 'the battle of Oxford', i.e. upon Auden's discovery of the poet (introduced by fellow student Tom Driberg) at Oxford University in 1926, having gone up in 1925 (Auden, qtd. Mendelson, 1981: 28). Porter adds further poets to the roll call: 'Laura Riding, [Robert] Graves, Marianne Moore, [W. B.] Yeats, Henry James, the old balladists, [Rainer Maria] Rilke – the list is very long' (Porter, 1978: 94). Isherwood has suggested that Auden's enthusiasm for some of these writers was merely a 'craze', while others might reasonably be categorized as an 'influence' (Isherwood, 1975: 77), but all offered examples of available poetic forms, their adaptation or rejection, and Auden was determined to experiment with all possible modes, claiming 'that he had written poems in every known form except the triolet' (Porter, 1978: 75). (Here he has in fact forgotten the 'Two Triolets' written in 1923 or '24 (Auden, 2003: 38)). This habit of exploring the poetic forms of others, and exhausting the range of forms on offer, relates to a

child's outlook not in terms of nervous pastiche, but in the fact that 'the urge to collect and categorize is often particularly strong in children, especially in male children […]. Collecting combines the creation and discovery of order; it may also function as a tribute offered to appease the gods' (O'Brien, 2013: 360). Appeasement, or the imposition of order upon chaos, is a useful way to view Auden's magpie approach to the poetic forms of others, given his living through Eliot's 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary existence' (Eliot, 1975: 187), or, put another way, through the early part of Eric Hobsbawm's 'age of extremes' (Hobsbawm, 1995), with the thirties in particular being what Auden himself called 'a scrambling decade' (Auden, 1976: 167). It is through poetic order that chaotic society might best be expressed; in fact, nothing may be expressed without the order necessary to found a poetic voice. Any fears that such a Catholic appetite for other poets and the fullest possible variety of verse might lead to derivative work are assuaged by Auden's technical facility (he can handle these forms), and distinctive voice (he has something to say within them). Auden's accession to a voice of authority comes via an almost preternatural poetic maturation, 'like Pope, he seems to have been born knowing things which other men have to learn by painful experience' (Porter, 1978: 78). Porter's enthusiasm here could be attributed to his attempt to account for the poet's life relatively soon after his death in 1973, but the critic returns to this impression almost thirty years later, stating that 'few writers in any century have emerged into public view so fully fledged in recognizable plumage' (Porter, 2004: 123). It might be the plumage of a magpie, but it is his own. Auden's cleaving to traditional verse forms, however ambitious in its variety, led to a split reputation by the late thirties, with the poet 'being hailed, in the same sentence, as both "traditional" and "revolutionary", the juxtaposition gesturing at the multifaceted nature of his genius' (Reeves, 2013: 297). That genius was both crowned and consolidated by the appearance of 'The Auden Double Number' of *New Verse*, edited by Geoffrey Grigson, in November 1937, an

honor that Porter refers to as an 'early apotheosis' (Porter, 2004: 123). Auden's divinity put the fear of God into some, including Charles Madge, whose 'Letter to the Intelligentsia' (1932) recorded the shock of his verse: 'But there waited for me in the morning, / Auden, fiercely. I read, shuddered, and knew / And all the world's stationary things / In silence moved to take up new positions' (Madge, 1933: 231-2). To reach this point – a shudder-inducing, god-like poetic magpie whose traditional forms impose order and yet shift the world's stationary things – Auden used the 200-odd poems of his juvenilia (Bucknell, 2003: xix) to converse with poetic heroes, to build and collapse the heroes of other realms, and to establish a series of poetic interests that were to abide in his later work.

In the poem of 1933 'Out on the lawn I lie in bed', Auden describes a visionary experience, which may possibly have taken place in reality at the Downs School in June of that year (Carpenter, 1981: 160-3; Mendelson, 1981: 159-62; Bucknell, 2003: xxiii). The only record of such an experience in the poet's life, the work is useful in underscoring the absence of vision in his poetic practice. Heavily influenced by Wordsworth in his early poetry, and yet often dismissive of him (in *Letter to Lord Byron* he is 'a most bleak old bore' (Auden, 1976: 89)), Auden may be chary of self-comparisons with the poet precisely because of Wordsworth's capacity for verse-driving visions. In his introduction to Anne Freemantle's *The Protestant Mystics* (1964), Auden sketches four levels of visionary access, although there is no sense that these experiences are known to the author: the Vision of Dame Kind, the Vision of Eros, the Vision of Agape, and the Vision of God (Auden, 1973: 58-64). The Vision of Eros is particularly useful in its establishment of unrequited love-at-a-distance (often of figures thus turned into heroes) which characterizes the love laments of the juvenilia and can also be traced in *The Orators*. However, Auden's attempt to taxonomize species of vision may also be a response, from the cooler emotional distance of older age, to the

inadequacies he felt regarding his own poetic faculties in the face of the Romantic model. This attitude is perhaps clearest in 'After Reading Keats's Ode' (1922 or '23), in which the 'immortal' 'Ode to a Nightingale', and the 'matchless glories' of Keats's poesy lead the young Auden to fret that he has not that talent for acute observation, or openness, so clear in Keats, and will not therefore hear the bird's song in such a way as to be inspired to poetry: 'What if her song that rode / The night should not so beauteous be / As thou didst hear it. So I be bereft / Thy wondrous vision of the divine bird' (Auden, 2003: 16). The envy here is of Keats's sensitivity of observance, his poetic acuity and skill, and the supra-physical vision that results. These anxieties about capacities found wanting lead to a cluster of poems in which landscape itself seems to reject the speaker. In 'California' (1922), the 'poor man'/poet retreats: '"But how should I, a poor man dare / To meet so close the full moon's stare?" / For this I stopped and stood quite still / Then turned with quick steps down that hill' (Auden, 2003: 3). High places resistant to the speaker's tread recur in the more well-known 'The Road's Your Place' (1925) ('all at once / Three crags rose up and overshadowed me / "What are you doing here, the road's your place"' (Auden, 2003: 95)), and in the slightly later 'Memento Creatoris Tui' (1925) in which the speaker 'walk[s] through crags which frowned upon a pass', but is warned by the wind and rain that 'soon they / Shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way' (Auden, 2003: 103). That it is specifically locations at height (hills, crags and high passes) that reject the speaker may be due to the influence of George Mallory. Bucknell claims that Auden was likely to have attended Mallory's lecture on 'the first [in fact, second] Everest expedition' in 1922, which played to a packed hall at Gresham's (Bucknell, 2003: 10). His talk would certainly have covered the physically demanding nature of such a summit attempt, and the notion that the mountain resented the attacks upon its flanks was common to climbers of the era. Muddling Mallory (himself an avowed fan of Romantic poetry, particularly the work of Shelley (Mallory, 1924:

unpaginated)) with the Romantics, Auden finds a landscape which both resists his limited physical capacities (to be contrasted with those of his brother John, a capable climber and outdoorsman), and rejects his attempts at access to a sublime vision. Both of these concerns resurface in *The Ascent of F6* (1936), considered briefly below.[vi]

It may be these anxieties regarding his own poetic and specifically imaginary capacities in comparison with the Romantic poets that form one major contribution to Auden's selection of industrial landscapes, rather than the lakes and fells of Wordsworth *et al*, as the location for his imaginative life (although, for all that, *F6* commences in the Lakes). *Letter to Lord Byron*'s memorable line: 'Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on / The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton' (Auden, 1976: 82) is written in only partial jest. While the latter emphasizes his love for industrial locations, or for the marked and abandoned *post*-industrial site (i.e. wastelands, or, following Eliot, waste lands), in its emphasis upon a Black Country/Midlands location, it is perhaps a little far south. Auden's heart belongs to northern, limestone, lead-mining country, to which was 'devoted much of his waking thought' from age six to twelve, an exercise in fantasy through which he explored the 'principles […] that governed the material world' (Mendelson, 1981: viii). Under the influence of Westgarth Forster's *A Treatise on a Section of the Strata from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Crossfell* (1883), a favorite book of his boyhood, Auden became fascinated by geology, the machinery of mining and rock processing, and the scarified and haunted landscape that results.[vii] In 'Writing', Auden makes the playful claim that 'a man occupies about 6 ft. in space and 70 years in time. Assuming the velocity of light to be 186,000 miles a second, then geography is about a hundred thousand million times more important to him than history' (Auden, 1990: 62-3). The mining landscape provides an important geography of the imagination, or what Porter (following Auden himself) calls a '*paysage moralisé*' (Porter, 1978: 101) and he later

recalls that ‘I was never so happy as when I was underground’ (Auden, qtd. Bucknell, 2003: xxiv). The mine operates in two apparently disparate ways in Auden’s imaginative usage, which are in fact vital in their interactions within his early work. ‘Mines were places of symbolic depths and hidden meaning, passages to a dark source of mystery and power’, and yet ‘even as a child he knew them also to be functioning artifacts, made for practical mundane reasons’, and so it is that ‘as an adult he wrote poems that found richness of meaning in the moral complexities of fact’ (Mendelson, 1981: xiv). Like the wren of ‘By the Gasworks, Solihull’ (1924), Auden ‘always sings / His loveliest among these broken things’ (Auden, 2003: 55).[viii]

‘The Old Lead-mine’ (1924) contains a confrontation with both the bald fact of the mine’s presence, and the existential trembles its apertures into the land may produce, and Auden returns to this founding scene of depth-plumbing in ‘Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own’ (1930), and in ‘New Year Letter’ (1940) which, in its return to childhood experience in later life, may be seen as a parallel effort to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. Based upon an experience at Rookhope which Bucknell dates to summer 1922 (Bucknell, 2003: 30), ‘Lead-mine’ records: ‘I peered a moment down the open shaft / Gloomy and black; I dropped a stone; / A distant splash, a whispering, a laugh / The icy hands of fear weighed heavy on the bone // I turned and travelled quickly down the track’ (Auden, 2003: 29-30). Most obviously, Freudian readings will accrue to such soundings, with the mine functioning as a geographical representation of the unconscious (Freud may meet D. H. Lawrence, another Auden influence, here). Further, Auden associates the limestone landscape with the body of his mother (see also the ‘Prologue’ to *The Orators* (1932): ‘By landscape reminded once of his mother’s figure / The mountain heights he remembers get bigger and bigger’ (Auden, 1932: 9)). Beyond the sonorous splash which sends the poet’s

efforts back to his own ear, the episode is connected to poetic practice itself in several ways: Auden may be said to view poetry as a kind of 'contraption' comparable to those he witnesses in mining areas; the 'hawk's eye view' important to the Auden circle of the thirties would reveal here (as he puts it in the re-write 'The Old Mine' (1924 or '25)) that 'the whole hillside is scribbled on!' (Auden, 2003: 31); and language itself contains uncontrollable, whispering depths of further meaning, illustrated in an imagined meeting between a man and woman on a train in 'Writing' (Auden, 1990: 41), and in the poem 'Speech' (1923 or '24): 'No word of thine but reveals some corner of thy heart / No phrase but lays bare some secret place' (Auden, 2003: 35). In using language 'as a branch of engineering' (Duchene, 1972: 35), Auden does not simply seek to represent mining landscapes through the contraption of his poetry, but also to view poetry itself as a form of excavation – dealing in the telling facts, and attending to the whispered depths beneath. Or, as Auden himself expresses it: 'much of our speech is like a tunnel under which the currents of feeling can pass unseen' (Auden, 1932: 40-1).

Auden's juvenilia not only establishes this limestone landscape in opposition to the sublime heights, and in so doing negotiates with the Romantics on the question of vision, but also addresses the themes we identified in 'Writing', including the figure of the literary hero, and the exercise in self-reflection necessary to establish one's poetic identity. Encomiums, often elegiac, form an important part of Auden's poetic output in the thirties and forties, including 'Rimbaud' (1938), 'A. E. Housman' (1938), 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (1939), and 'At the Grave of Henry James' (1941). An early example can be found in the verse to 'Richard Jefferies' (1925), a figure who offers to Auden an alternative model of the literary hero, sidestepping the necessity of visionary access to the landscape, to sing a plain song that stems *from* that landscape itself. Jefferies is 'no Shelley to light up a firmament / And plunge to

darkness like a shattered star' (Auden, 2003: 92), and yet: 'winds found a pipe and blew thereon, / Sometimes with bubbling joy, now with wild griefs / But fresh as elder scent' (92). It is the freshness of his voice, and its humble sounding of nature without apparent intervention, that leads to his immortality: 'his voice cries on / Among his Wiltshire downs; in strange beliefs / And rough slow-moving speech of village folk: / What more?' (92). We might note here that in 'Writing', Auden advocates a return to orality, at least for those concerned with rural/manual labor, as well as lamenting the loss of myth (Auden, 1990). For him it seems that Jefferies has been more easily assimilated into the oral tradition, due to his humble process of vocalizing the natural world, akin to the Aeolian harp. In the earlier 'J. S. Bach' (1924) Auden is again harping on his immortality theme: 'Your voice will hush, Sebastian as ours / Before the silence of a dying world. / Yet live on now' (Auden, 2003: 67), with a direct appeal to the addressee that is a feature of the later encomiums, but here teeters between the intimate and the presumptuous, in that Auden the proto-Artist is on first name terms with the greats. One final quotation from 'Writing' is pertinent here, where he claims that 'writing begins from the sense of separateness in time of "I'm here to day, but I shall be dead to-morrow and you will be alive in my place and how can I speak to you"' (Auden, 1932: 43). In addressing Bach he switches position and reassures the composer of his continuing connection to the living world, just as the Miltonian marble would be set up in the hearts of Shakespeare's readers.

The concerns we have ascribed to the juvenilia coalesce in 'Who stands, the crux left of the watershed' (1927) which, as noted above, Auden considers to be the moment of assumption of his poetic voice, and his transition to adulthood. Again, we are in an industrial landscape ('An industry already comatose, / Yet sparsely living' (Auden, 2003: 218)). One of the contraptions that the young Auden reflected upon as a possible correlate for the poem is

present (‘A ramshackle engine / At Cashwell raises water’ (218)). Again, a figure is rejected from the location (‘Go home now, stranger, proud of your young stock’ (218)). Both crux and watershed suggest the bifurcated, the former in the denotation of a crossroads or dilemma, the latter in its dual meaning of ‘a divide on high ground where waters separate, or a basin on low ground where waters gather’ (Mendelson, 1981: 33-4). We are returned here to Auden’s mining language of underground shafts and streams, and its appearance in his attempts, in ‘Writing’, to describe the operation of speech and the written word. That Auden should be seen to reach his maturity in a poem of splits and divisions is apt, given his own understanding of poetry as a self-confrontation. This is most clear in the piece written earlier that year, ‘Narcissus’ (1927). As in the later Auden, paraphrase-able meaning evades us here, but the mythic impetus is clear when the speaker meets his distorted reflection: ‘I know you now, see well what you are doing. / Bend asymptotic to our unity. / We meet at last, this film between us, / Between the perception and the noun, / The desire, and the assurance, I and AM. / […] I touch the pool, / Engine of your becoming – Distortion? Grief? Disgust?’ (Auden, 2003: 186). The speaker/Narcissus at once affirms his existence (with a hint of Sonnet 121 resurfacing here) through the ‘engine of your becoming’ which is both the pool’s surface film and poetry itself, and yet, in forming an ‘asymptotic’ curve, he reaches but may never intersect. Further, the pool/poetry provides a distorted vision which both confirms identity and provokes disgust (‘corroded mirrors’ make a later appearance (186)). The poem opens with the lines ‘I shall sit here through the evening, / Hour when the fisherman at the inn / Stares at the window, his boots off, waiting for the lamp; / When frogs protrude their muzzles from the pond, / Exhale in the dusk’ (185). At first this seems simply to present two more examples of self-reflection – a fisherman, who has presumably failed to use his watery working medium to view himself, and now uses a window at dusk for a moment of contemplation; and a frog, who appears from the other side of the pond’s surface film, and

clouds the air. But the passage is perhaps most interesting in its debt to Eliot, the other poetic curve to which Auden has been bending for the past year.[ix] The fisherman finds a correlate in Eliot's typist, seen by Tiresias (himself a doubled figure, 'throbbing between two lives' (Eliot, 2000a: 2376)) at 'the evening hour that strives / Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea', who lights her stove rather than wait for the lamp (2377). Meanwhile, the otter that wrinkles the surface of the pond (Auden, 2003: 186) recalls Tiresias's 'wrinkled female breasts' (Eliot, 2000a: 2377). April, Eliot's 'cruellest month' (2370) receives a mention (Auden, 2003: 186). There are other influences here too, of course (the 'linnet' is Yeats's (186), the 'wretched arras' Shakespeare's (186)) but the supra-historical, grandiose tone is Tiresias's. While 'Narcissus' forms an important part of the story of Auden's progress towards a voice of his own, and dramatizes the moment of self-reflection we have read as crucial to accession to an adult poetic career, it is also, characteristically, a poem best read as a conversation with another poet. That the chosen poet is Eliot is appropriate, not only because he so revolutionizes Auden's own verse at this time, but because his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), first read by Auden in 1926 (Bucknell, 2003: xx), advocates just such a negotiation with literary history. Conversation with past work is not just the preserve of the encomiums, it is the business of all poetry. If, as Auden says in 'Narcissus', 'The words we stuck together on the nursery floor / Broke in our jammy fingers' (Auden, 2003: 186), by 1927 he had not only escaped the nursery, but learnt to stick those words together again.

<h1> The Plays

If literary heroes mark the juvenilia, then upon the establishment of a poetic voice Auden turned his attention to heroism in other fields, and encomiums are sidelined in favor of the

dissection of the process through which such heroes are made. This preoccupation, with heroic models and those who form and need them, is most conspicuous in Auden's dramatic works of the 1930s – both those he wrote alone, and those composed alongside Isherwood, for the Group Theatre under Rupert Doone. The latest iteration of a personal interest, such explorations of the hero also had an external impetus, given their inter-war context. As Francois Duchene expresses it, while unquestioned heroism may be adequate for an imperial generation, 'their descendants […] who have experienced tragedy in the flesh, are purged of grand opera. Armchair warriors cultivate their heroisms, not, usually, front-line warriors' (Duchene, 1972: 28). Auden (and Isherwood) is concerned with both sides of this equation – those in their armchairs at home, who long for something to believe in (most explicitly stated in *The Dance of Death* (1933), in which the Announcer pleads: 'Vital young man / Do what you can / For our dust / We who are weak / Want a splendid physique / You must, you must' (Auden, 1933: 11)), and those in whom their faith is placed, deservedly or, perhaps, dangerously. In the 'Address for Prize Day' of *The Orators* (1932), the boys of a public school are asked to think: 'Commemoration. Commemoration. What does it mean? What does it mean? Not what does it mean to them, there, then. What does it mean to us, here, now? It's a facer, isn't it boys? But we've all got to answer it' (Auden, 1932: 13). The location, suggests Stan Smith, is Helensburgh, where Auden taught from 1930 (Smith, 2013: 35), although there is also plenty of Sedbergh here, a school whose athletic boys captured Auden's imagination, and which became a half-fantasized location where heroes of the athletic type might well be bred (Bucknell, 2003: xxxviii). While 'commemoration' implies recollections of the Great War, the prize day context suggests that other heroes of the past will be conjured. The facile tone of the speaker undercuts his injunction that the boys contemplate the meaning of the commemorative process, but for Auden's own audience questions are raised about the function of the hero, athletic or otherwise, in the closed shop of

the all-male public school. In 'Writing', Auden states that 'the earliest literatures we have belong to the Heroic age, a stage in the development of societies already patriarchal when increase in size forces them to migrate in small bachelor groups under a leader to find a wife and home elsewhere on conquered soil' (Auden, 1990: 51).[x] The bachelor group sets the scene for the action of *The Orators*, and its hero is the mysterious figure of the Airman, who dominates Book II, and whom Smith reads as analogous to 'T. E. Lawrence, "Aircraftsman Shaw", widely regarded before his premature death [in 1935] as a potential British Mussolini who might cure the English sickness' (Smith, 2013: 44). Auden's *Now and Then* review of B. H. Liddell Hart's biography, *T. E. Lawrence: Arabia and After* (1934) compared Lawrence to Lenin ('two whose lives exemplify most completely what is best and significant in our time' (Auden, 1977: 321)), and suggested that the life of the former 'is an allegory of the transformation of the Truly Weak Man into the Truly Strong Man', in that he has lived the truth 'that action and reason are inseparable; it is only in action that reason can realise itself, and only through reason that action can become free' (320-1).[xi] While the Airman of the *Orators* cannot be mapped on directly to these interpretations of Lawrence's life, his '*Airman's Alphabet*' certainly combines strength and weakness, and hints at wasted sacrifice. While A is for 'ACE – Pride of parents / and photographed person / and laughter in leather' (Auden, 1932: 51), and flying facilitates O for 'OBSERVER – Peeper through periscope / and peerer at pasture / and eye in the air' (53), the Airman can also be 'VICTIM – Corpse after crash / and carried through country / and atonement for aircraft' (53), with the implication in the latter case that it is the loss of hardware that is the real tragedy. In *Letter to Lord Byron,* Auden introduced a note of weariness to his incredulity in the report that 'we've learned to bomb each other from the air' (Auden, 1976: 86). Yet the end of the alphabet renders 'YOUTH – Daydream of devils / and dear to the damned / and always to us' (Auden, 1932: 54) which, although 'always' hovers perilously amongst 'damned', 'dear' and, for that

matter, 'YOUTH', at least brings us back to the question of commemoration, in which the Airman will be 'carried through country'. Gareth Reeves suggests that *The Orators* owes its peculiar rituals and mysterious leader to Saint-John Perse's *Anabase* (1924), 'undigested lumps' of which Auden recalls Eliot finding in the work (Reeves, 2013: 300). The magpie Auden is in evidence again, 'as if an oracle had swept the historical airwaves and left an utterly confused but enormously panoptic set of data on the desk of one highly imaginative student' (Porter, 2004: 127). The focal point for that panoptic data set is the problematic figure of the hero.

In *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), the first of the collaborations with Isherwood, the vaguely sketched borders of *The Orators* are replaced by the countries of Ostnia and Westland, the former modeled on a European autocracy, the second a broad portrait of Fascist Germany. They share a contested border further explored in *F6* and in *On the Frontier* (1938). We begin in Pressan Ambo, an English village the audience is invited to imagine in our own way, although sentimental attachment is paramount: 'You shall / choose its location / Wherever your heart directs you most longingly to look; / you are loving towards it' (Auden/Isherwood, 1935: 11). One man of Pressan, Alan, is selected to go on a debased form of heroic quest, seeking Francis, scion of the village: 'For walk he must the empty / Selfish journey / Between the needless risk / And the endless safety' (14). The tone of the play is uneven, and the eventual revelation that Francis has in fact been present on the stage for much of the action, merely disguised as a dog, risks descending into pure farce.[xii] However, the dog conceit introduces the matter of masking and poetic position, since he can be seen as the correlate to the Airman in his dog's eye, rather than hawk's eye, vision of the world: 'And now here you all are, looking extremely uncomfortable, as well you may, considering that you know I've had a dog's-eye view of you for the last ten years' (172). In

fact, ‘it’s an awful shock to start seeing people from underneath’ (173), the latter an important term in its suggestion of that old geological-industrial theme of the Audenesque: excavation. Such excavations lead to the interrogation of two possible hero figures in this play, the soldier and the surgeon. George the dog, whose skin Francis wears, used to belong to a ‘very famous author’ of ‘“virile” poetry’ for which he was knighted during the War (145). Following the revelation of Francis, the skin speaks for itself, recalling the words of George’s former owner in 1918: ‘Less than a hundred miles from here, young men are being blown to pieces. […] Every time I hear that, I say to myself: You fired that shell. […] Invalid poets with a fountain pen […] we, the sedentary and learned, whose schooling cost the most, the least conspicuous of them all, are the assassins’ (145).[xiii] Metaphors such as ‘under the skin’ and ‘close to the bone’ are in play here, as Auden/Isherwood analyze the complicities of their profession, albeit via the fictional skin of a dead dog, voicing the words of its former master – a position of some distance from the slaughter. Investigations beneath the skin are also the preserve of that other possible hero model, the surgeon, and critics have in other contexts suggested the surgeon as an artistic partner to Auden himself. Porter remarks upon ‘the sense that Auden is taking a scalpel to language itself’ in his early poetry (Porter 2004: 126). The linguistic scalpel reveals the dog beneath the skin, the savagery of complacency or complicity in the face of mass slaughter. The surgical scalpel of Sir William Spurgeon the surgeon also fails to address Europe’s rot, or correct its crookedness. Act II Scene IV establishes the surgical theatre as a place of worship for the false idol of the doctor, and a four-part harmony is asked of the chorus during this liturgical call and response:

> SUR. I believe
>
> ALL. In the physical causation of all phenomena, material or mental: and in the germ theory of disease. And in Hippocrates, the father of Medicine […]. And I believe in surgical treatment for duodenal ulcer […] (105)

SUR. Let not the patient react unfavourably to the anaesthetic.

ALL. But let it save him from pain.

SUR. Let there be no unforeseen complications.

ALL. Neither let sepsis have the advantage.

SUR. May my skill not desert me.

ALL. But guide your hands. (105)

The surgeon, while '*adjusting his gloves and picking up a scalpel*' remarks that 'it's a terrible thing, nurse, to keep wicket for a man's life' (106), although since we later learn that he is a 'famous amateur cricketer' (106), we presume that he in fact enjoys the 'game'. He later loses his patient through arrogant inattention, and is not a savior after all. Sir William may owe something to Maurice Renard's superstar surgeon Cerral in *The Hands of Orlac* (1920), which achieved its second adaptation to film in the year in which *Dog* was written, directed by Karl Freund under the title *Mad Love* (1935). Cerral is a 'magician with the scalpel' (Renard, 1981: 27), 'master', 'prince', 'hero', 'athlete' (29) and 'pioneer' (31), and Renard, like Auden/Isherwood, turns to religious terminology to best convey his mysterious power, primeval in the wielding although modern in its means: he is 'a priest […] of the spirit' (30), whose dazzling white consulting room is a 'snowy temple' (30). Cerral, who is also revealed to be a fraud, would be an appealing figure to Auden and Isherwood, searching for fractured models of heroism to set alongside the Airman and the mountaineer.[xiv]

F6 has been discussed elsewhere (Garrington, 2013) and we pause here only to note that the mountain had in Auden's earlier work already begun to function as a space in which a contemporary quest could be carried out. In 'Everest' (1922), likely to have been inspired by the Mallory lecture mentioned above, the mountain is appealed to as 'a world above a world' (Auden, 2003: 9), another space in which the 'closed shop'/bachelor group, this time a

climbing party, may operate. The speaker takes up the position of a Mallory, a lead mountaineer: 'In vain to reach thy head we try' (9), and is daunted by the long view of the mountain's geological endurance: 'You see the fall of the Gods of yesterday / And the fall of the Gods of tomorrow' (9). Meanwhile, the first of the 'Six Odes' in Book III of *The Orators* provides the line: 'Neither in the bed nor on the *arrête* was there shown me / One with power' (Auden, 1932: 87), a further request for a hero, the Truly Strong Climber. *F6*'s critics complained of the transposition of public school power relations onto the mountain, with F. R. Leavis suggesting that Auden's cleaving to both his school days and his intellectual clique was hindering his poetic development: 'For the corroboration of the surmise that the habits of the group-world are intimately associated with the failure of Mr. Auden's new talent to mature we have the new play that he has written with Christopher Isherwood' (Leavis, 1936: 325). Dilys Powell, in the *London Mercury*, saw the 'characteristics of a boy's adventure story' on the stage, but still observed the 'essentials [of] a direct heroic tragedy' (Powell, 1936: 561). Meanwhile Hugh Gordon Porteus spotted public school stereotypes within the climbing party (Porteus, 1937: 433), but maintained that 'there is […] no show in London better worth seeing at the moment. […] this is the sort of play that we are going to get much more of in the future' (432). This prognosis not withstanding, writing with Auden's entire body of work in view, Porter sees the weaknesses of *F6* as a drama: 'The poetry tends to be forced and the ideas offer rather a Reader's Digest version of the psychology of heroism and the filial bond' (Porter 1978: 82). The play is, however, helpful to our present discussions in its presentation of 'armchair mountaineers', members of the public hungry for the heroism of the climb as a distraction from their mundane existences (as Mr. A[verage] puts it: 'No, nothing that matters will ever happen; / Nothing you'd want to put in a book; / Nothing to tell to impress your friends – / The old old story that never ends: / The eight o'clock train, the customary place, / Holding the paper in front of your face' (Auden/Isherwood, 1936: 18-19)),

and in its return to the theme of commemoration. With all the lead climbers dead by the end of the conspicuously purposeless expedition to scale *F6,* tributes are offered by a climber competitor, a General mired in the language of military honor, a newspaper magnate with his eye on the headlines, and the brother of Ransom, head of the climbing party, whose fraternal rivalry has been in place since youth. While this closing scene ends with the call 'England! England! England!' (122), the sacrifice of these men is for nought. The monument chosen to honor Ransom is a plain obelisk, essentially a mountain in stone form, recalling Auden's plea: 'Let us honour if we can / The vertical man / Though we value none / But the horizontal one' (Auden, 1930: unpaginated). Put another way, the obelisk stands in the place of a man who, were he truly worthy, should have been honored in life not in death. Both the expedition and the mourning practices which follow it stage heroics, but reveal them to be empty. As Stagmantle the media magnate confides to Ransom: 'Between ourselves, this expedition's nothing more or less than a political racket. You know that. So do I. Well, who cares!' (Auden/Isherwood, 1936: 44).

In an interview in 1965, Auden claimed that it was *F6* that finally pushed him out of England, for fear that he might, following the success of the play, become an honored vertical man: '*F6* was the end. I knew I must leave when I wrote it. … I knew it because I knew then that if I stayed, I would inevitably become a member of the British establishment' (Matthias, 1992: 98). Shortly before departure, Auden wrote one of his most well-known elegiac encomiums, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939), in which he returns to the topics we have traced here – hero figures, conversations with literary tradition and, most markedly, posthumous reputation. In an echo of Milton's 'On Shakespeare' with which we began, while 'snow disfigure[s] the public statues' (Auden, 1976: 197) or traditional monuments, it is within his readers that Yeats finds his true legacy: 'he became his admirers', and is therefore

‘scattered among a hundred cities / And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections’ (197). Milton anticipates for Shakespeare a sculptor’s response in his audience, as they are turned to marble in their grief, as Lot’s wife was turned to salt.[xv] By contrast, Auden imagines a gustatory response for Yeats: ‘The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living’ (197). While this physiological metaphor is a potent means of conveying Eliot’s suggested relationship with the poetic tradition, and while Yeats’s admirers form a ‘livelong’ monument comparable with Shakespeare’s, it is interesting to note that Auden’s critics consider his own poetic practice as a kind of digestion: ‘In his stomach, other men’s ideas have proved continuously creative’ (Porter, 1978: 88). Eliot’s own reference to ‘undigested lumps’ of Saint-John Perse, noted above, should be read in this context, and engagement of the digestive function might be one way to parse Isherwood’s distinction between ‘craze’ and ‘influence’. Poetic inheritance is for Auden, and for his most enthusiastic critical supporters, a gustatory matter, not in terms of ‘taste’, but in terms of the proper break-down and absorption of tradition – ‘Reader’s Digest’ indeed. It is perhaps as a result of this digestion of traditional forms, and the consolidation and undermining of tradition that accrues to the consideration of hero figures (literary or otherwise), that Auden’s allegiance to modernism becomes difficult to assess. For Fordham, Auden is ‘part of the generation which succeeded the modernists’ (Fordham, 2010: 56); Tim Youngs calls him a ‘prominent modernist’ amongst the travel writers (Youngs, 2010: 269). Marina Mackay debates the sense of extending the term ‘modernist’ to include the comparatively accessible ‘Auden generation’ (Mackay, 2010: 473), while Dean Irvine finds a solution in referring to the ‘socially and politically progressive modernism of the Auden generation’ (Irvine, 2010: 886). Porter, for his part, states that Auden is ‘not a paid-up modernist of the sort of Eliot and Pound’, given his resistance (at least from the forties onwards) to obscurity, and his love for tradition, not only in reference but also in form (Porter, 2004: 128). Given Eliot’s own claims for the

importance of literary tradition, that last point is an important one. For Eliot, his formless age mitigated the use of traditional poetic forms and supported the use of free verse; while Auden's ageless form forged an alternative route, albeit with Eliot as a guiding star. Accused, after the move to the United States, of being a 'lost leader', Auden was subject to 'the howls of hate of a generation of modernists who had seen their exemplar calmly turn revolutionary. Yet the evidence of Auden's intention of performing this palace revolution was there from the start' (Porter, 1978: 73-4). Auden's 'revolutions' can be traced alongside his traditions when the hero figure is used to investigate comparatively neglected areas of his corpus: the juvenilia, the 'Writing' manuscript, and the plays of the thirties. Let us honor him if we can.

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[i] I am stubborn in ignoring here Mendelson's suggestion that '[Auden's] juvenilia call for no more than a few paragraphs' (Mendelson, 1981: vii).

[ii] Auden himself seems to support this suggestion that his 'early' work can be assigned to his years in England, while his maturity as a poet takes place in the United States, when he writes in 'New Year Letter' (1940): 'England to me is my own tongue / And what I did when I was young' (Auden, 1976: 181). While the poem lies outside of our present remit, it is notable as a 'seed-cataloguing' roll call of poetic greats (see note iii, below).

[iii] The *Letter to Lord Byron* includes a bald equation between financial and poetic stock, for comic effect: 'Joyces are firm and there there's nothing new. / Eliots have hardened just a point or two. / Hopkins are brisk,

thanks to some recent boosts. There's been some further weakening in Prousts' (Auden, 1976: 85). Eliot, with his banking background, might at least have appreciated the conceit. It is this facility in assessing and evaluating the work of other writers that has led Porter to remark upon Auden's 'seed-cataloguer's way with the poets' (Porter, 1978: 89).

[iv] The manuscript is held in the Rare Book Collections of the University of Edinburgh's Main Library, MS.3080. It has been published in its original form, edited with limited modifications for sense, by Katherine Bucknell (Bucknell, 1990).

[v] Auden's understanding of group life includes the practice of communal dance, in which 'every foot comes down together'. 'Foot' here operates somewhere between the physical and the metrical, and he goes on to note that 'metre excites us' and that 'when a poet is writing verse, the feeling as it were excites the words and makes them fall into a definite group going through definite dancing movements, just as feeling excite[s] the different members of a crowd and makes them act together' (Auden, 1990: 46). The passage is interesting for its indication of Auden's concern with prosody and musicality, and again the representation of a group life now lost seems to owe much to Gerald Heard (indeed a cross-reference to Heard's essay on the history of ideas is included in the published version of 'Writing'). The group life concept is outlined in Heard's *Social Substance of Religion: An Essay on the Evolution of Religion* (1931), and in *The Ascent of Humanity: An Essay on the Evolution of Civilization from Group Consciousness through Individuality to Super-Consciousness* (1929).

[vi] For a more thorough exploration of Auden's interest in the history of mountaineering, and in the figure of George Mallory in particular, see Garrington: 2013.

[vii] In 'The Engine House' (1924), Auden took such experiments one step further, when he attempted to make poetry of the technical vocabulary of the processing of ore (Auden, 2003: 72).

[viii] For a related ornithological correlate for the poet himself, see 'The Old Colliery' (1924): 'Where often now / A thrush will lurk / Whose singing blesses / Man's handiwork' (Auden, 2003: 60).

[ix] The 'sterilised left-handed lover' to which Auden refers in the penultimate stanza (Auden, 2003: 186) might be read as Eliot, who made sterility such a prominent theme in *The Waste Land* (1922), and whose prose essays make him a writer of, in Miltonian terms, left-handed prose and right-handed poetry. However, the speaker, in reaching for the pool's surface with his writing hand (the right), would see an apparent left hand reaching upwards. The 'left-handed lover' being oneself, we can give credence to Katherine Bucknell's suggestion that this is in part a poem about self-love in baser terms; one concerned with masturbation (Bucknell, 2003: 187). Further, the poem's epigraph, from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, refers to those who 'spill themselves upon

those things which are seen and are but temporal', the 'hunger-starved' who 'lick their very shadows' (Augustine, 1912: 2:20-1). Wrangling with one's shadow turns up again as a possible euphemism for masturbation in Auden's 'Bach and the Lady' (1927): 'Do not sneer, stranger, if one by one, / The crowd who followed her are gone / To strangle their own shadows, or lie / Bitterly with a harlot' (Auden, 2003: 192). We should note that these poems were written in a self-described 'ascetic' year, when Auden avoided sexual relationships, at least with others.

[x] A further reference to the Heroic age occurs in *Letter to Lord Byron*: 'You liked to be the centre of attention, / The gay Prince Charming of the fairy story, / Who tamed the Dragon by his intervention. / In modern warfare, though it's just as gory, / There isn't any individual glory' (Auden, 1976: 87).

[xi] Criticism makes liberal reference to the 'Truly Strong Man' as an Auden trope, and it is worth remembering his explication here, alongside the anecdote that provides the terminology. Auden has read 'the statement made by a man after he had cut the throats of his wife and family. "No, I am not the truly strong man. The truly strong man lounges about in bars and does nothing at all"' (Auden, 1977: 320). It is interesting that both models return us to the bachelor position of heroic literature.

[xii] At times, the authors are clearly playing things for laughs. Upon meeting the (somewhat anti-semitically named) Grabstein the financier, Alan gives the mistaken impression that he is a poet, to a horrified response, followed by a more measured assessment: 'Of course, mind you, I've nothing against poets, provided they make good. They say that one or two fellows at the top of the tree are earning as much as four thousand a year. I doubt it myself….But the fact remains that most of them are moral degenerates or Bolsheviks, or both. The scum of the earth' (Auden/Isherwood, 1935: 87).

[xiii] A critique of the waste of war is more explicit still in *On the Frontier*, the last of the verse drama collaborations between Auden and Isherwood. Dr. Thorvald the academic states, in reflecting on the horror of the Ostnian/Westland border wars: 'You see, I was brought up to think that a man's greatest privilege was to fight for his country; and it's hard to change one's ideas. Perhaps we were all wrong. War seems so beastly when it actually happens! Perhaps "country" and "frontier" are old-fashioned words that don't mean anything now. What are we really fighting for? I feel so muddled!' (Auden/Isherwood, 1938: 91).

[xiv] While I move on here, it is worth remarking upon Act II, Scene II of *Dog* for its presentation of Alan's right and left foot in cantankerous conversation, with the right an upper class character, and the left's more humble origins intended to be indicated by his possession of '*a cockney accent*' (Auden/Isherwood, 1935: 112):

> LEFT F. You and yer Public School edjerkytion! Ort ter 'ave bin a sky pilot, you ort!

> RIGHT F. It's very easy to sneer. But the fact remains that without some kind of standards a fellow just goes to pieces. One saw enough of that in the War. Who were the best officers? The boys who had been captains of their school fifteens. And the more one knocks about the world, the more one comes to realise…
>
> LEFT F. Ow, lay orf it! Yer mikes me sick! I ain't goin' to listen ter another of yer lectures on he Team Spirit, an' that's stryte! (114)

The passage is notable not only for its skepticism regarding public school education and suitability for war, but for its return to the left/right hand/foot trope begun, as seen above, in the poem 'Narcissus'. In the course of discussing Winston Churchill, Auden remarked upon the English national character as including 'an illimitable capacity for not letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing' (Auden, 1996: 31). Critics have, perhaps unwittingly, taken up the theme, with Sean O'Brien remarking that 'while Auden may at times seek to disenchant us with one hand, he is often to be found enforcing the spell with the other, in which he holds a conductor's baton' (O'Brien, 2013: 363). Meanwhile, a reflective obituary from Clive James remembers an encounter with Auden himself: 'I can still remember those unlucky hands; one of them holding a cigarette, the other holding a brimming glass, and both trembling. The mind boggled at some of the things they had been up to. But one of them had refurbished the language' (James, 1973: unpaginated). The resemblance to James Joyce's reply to a request from a fan that he let him kiss the hand that wrote *Ulysses* – 'No, it did lots of other things too' – should be observed (Ellmann, 2010: 136).

[xv] A specifically marble monument turns up in Auden's 'The Unknown Citizen' (1939), bearing the officious epigraph '*(To JS/07/M/378 / This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)*', in which the honored is 'found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint' (Auden, 1976: 201). Finn Fordham calls this poetry that 'raise[s] spectres of an awesome machinery of state power underpinned by state knowledge' (Fordham, 2010: 55).